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CUSTOMERS

Ignoring Those Negative Business Reviews? How Restaurants Can Respond Spectacularly to Bad Yelp, Google, and Online Reviews

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Ignoring that negative business review that reads, “If I could give less than one star I would...”? That’s a mistake with hefty consequences. Whether it’s one outlier or a trend of negativity, neglecting customer feedback only reflects poorly on your brand. Why? Beyond dragging down a rating that potential customers to your restaurant are using to make their dining decisions, it makes it seem like you don’t care about your customers, their opinions, or providing a quality experience.

What if instead, you worked through the feedback, took the useful gems of info, and leveraged it to improve your services? What if you transparently responded to customers and took ownership of where your restaurant fell short?

Sometimes restaurant owners try to mask their problems and not address the issues at hand, says Alexis Krisay, president of marketing at [Serendipit Consulting](#). Being open, honest, and transparent while taking responsibility for what went wrong matters to your customers.

How you respond to bad reviews on Yelp, Google, OpenTable, Facebook, or TripAdvisor is critical. Solving the situation, rather than avoiding it, makes your restaurant shine online.

Why Restaurant Owners Shouldn’t Shy Away From Negative Reviews

If you wouldn’t ignore a customer in the restaurant, why would you ignore them online?, says Stephen Maly, director of hospitality at [IGC Hospitality](#). “Whether or not they [communicate an issue] in the restaurant or through an online review, it’s still our job as a hospitality company to try to find a way to make that experience better and try to find a way to recover it.”

You’ve got to respond ASAP, whether the review is five stars or one, and treat it as genuine, says Nawar Miri, president and co-owner at [Simsim](#). “I believe in almost all cases you can win a guest back, if you handle the situation promptly and professionally,” he explains, “That’s how we’ve handled it and it’s been effective for us where we’ve turned things around.”

For example, Miri had issues with a Yelper where he received a three-star review. He responded immediately, apologized, and asked for the date and time the customer dined at Simsim. He also offered them a few entrees on the house because they originally had a large order. Then, Miri refocused training to prevent a repeat situation. The result? The customer redeemed his offer two days later plus updated their Yelp review to five stars.

If a negative review hangs around with no response, customers see a one-sided story, explains Krisay. But if restaurant owners address the issues with Yelpers or negative reviews fast, and have an open, honest conversation in real time, that shows respect, and diners remember that.

“Someone took the time out of their day to write a review, whether it was a sentence, a paragraph, especially if it's like a Yelp Elite for example...And oftentimes they don't leave a review unless they go multiple times to an establishment,” explains Miri, “If I write a negative review of a place, I'd want to hear back from them and see, do they care about my review? Do they care about fixing it if there's a situation? [A response] shows that you give a darn about your business, but you also care about what they think.”

You could choose to pat yourself on the back for every four- or five-star review that rolls in and not worry about how to fix your Google or Yelp reviews. But at the end of the day, if you're seeing a repetitive complaint, Maly says you'd be silly not to listen to it and neglect that crucial customer feedback.

How to Appropriately Address Negative Reviews

Maly's process for responding to a bad Yelp or Google review comes in four stages:

1. Respond with empathy
2. Zero in on exactly what the complaint is about
3. Figure out what the customer is asking for
4. Do everything you can to make it right

“It's an emotional process when you're reading [reviews] because you're so invested in what you do every day, but you have to take the emotion and ego out of it, which is hard,” he explains. It's critical, however, that your tone is empathetic and that you're trying to understand what happened.

Take ownership of the mistake in an empathetic way that shows you understand where the customer is coming from. Then work on righting the wrong. This may mean offering a discount or gift card to apologize plus encourage them to visit you again for a second chance.

“[Restaurant owners] get deflated and say ‘I wish I could always get good reviews,’ but typically people only leave a review if it's going to be negative because they feel like they want an outlet,” Krisay explains, “When [you] read reviews...humanize them more, and understand how that person was feeling rather than shrug it off...[Restaurateurs] need to understand why that customer felt the way they did.”

It's how you respond to bad Yelp or Google reviews that strengthens your customers' experiences. If you engage their review, they feel like you're relating to them, they matter, they're not just a check number, and that you've provided a personal touch to correct the mistake.

Krisay also recommends having an escalation plan in place to quicken response time. This includes different tiers explaining how to respond, what could possibly go wrong at your specific restaurant, what's happened in the past, and what possible solutions to implement based on the severity of the review.

Using tracking software can also help fix Yelp or Google reviews because if all reviews are collected in one place, your managers can respond ASAP. This strategy makes it clear where your best and worst reviews are coming from, how your customers are responding back, and if your response tactics are working to improve your overall reviews. If you work on creating high-quality, empathetic responses, answering quickly, implementing customer feedback, and working on issues with your team, you'll see your positive reviews start to stack up.

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